



The Church of St John at Hackney is situated in the London Borough of Hackney. It was built in 1792 to the north east of the medieval parish church, of which only St Augustine's Tower remains. The current building is a testimony to the Hackney Phalanx, and acts as a political statement. It was designed to seat 2,200 people, and is a magnificent example of classical Georgian architecture.

Introduction, description and goals of the project

In April 2007, we asked the question, 'What is St John at Hackney?' We sought the opinions of many people: we consulted with Hackney Council, the police and the health authority as well as the wider Hackney community and our own congregation. We dared to think boldly and creatively, while remaining resolute that our central identity was the joyful privilege of being the parish church of Hackney.

On 24 June 2008, the result of this amazing year of listening, the St John at Hackney Project was launched by Bishop Stephen, the former Bishop of Stepney. The project was our emerging five-year mission action plan and at its core were three main objectives.

First, we would conserve and celebrate our heritage together. Communities need a shared identity, and the Hackney identity is partly found in our story. People who have shaped the way in which we live our lives - Joshua and John Watson, Christopher Urswick and Francis Beaufort - are all associated with St John's. To celebrate this heritage, we have preserved their monuments, helped to develop school visits and fully restored our tower and clock faces.

Second, we aimed to open our building for wider community and business use. Our church and churchyard are the largest community resource in Hackney, and they are to be used by the wider community. Therefore, in our building and gardens we have hosted concerts, job fairs, academic symposiums, counselling, welfare support, homeless support, feedback sessions following the August 2011 riots, exercise classes, rehearsals, ice rinks, cinema screenings, training sessions for city workers, fetes, dance classes, choirs, community and cultural





celebrations and the Hackney Children's Theatre. This is in addition to our community pastoral support through our baptism, wedding and funeral ministry.

Third, we sought to develop our own resources to support children and young people, older people and health-related projects. From this we now operate six weekly children's groups, two yearly residential holidays for young people, play schemes and numerous other children's activities. We run a monthly lunch group for older people, and we also support a number of health initiatives in the community.

This is all very exciting, but none of it would be possible without worship and prayer at the heart of all we do. In the past five years, our congregation has almost trebled in size; we have learned new prayer techniques, deepened our understanding of the Scriptures, taken people on retreat and even made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This has compelled us to face outwards towards the community, with all the incredible resources that we have in each other and in our fine Georgian building.

St John at Hackney is a place that is very much alive and well. Celebrating our incredible story, we are **confident** about our future, rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ; **creative** in our telling of this good news in so many different ways; and **compassionate** in our love and care for the global community, experienced in Hackney, that we have been called to serve.

Summary of Works

Looking after a 200+-year-old Grade II* listed building is an ongoing challenge, but one that we continue to meet. The building is now watertight following repairs to the roof and tower. Repairs are prioritised and acted on as budgets permit. We have completed a restoration of the tower, clock and weather vane, which now shines for all of Hackney to enjoy.

In 2012 we completed the reordering of our main church space, removing the pews and replacing them with new chairs. With a capacity of 1400, the building can now be used for all kinds of acts of worship, and also great community events. This space is used for live music, recordings, job fairs, and as a place to discern and discover our Hackney heritage together.

In the autumn of 2010, work began on the restoration of two large monuments in the Urswick Chapel and the refurbishment of the Chapel itself. Skillington's Workshop carried out the conservation work, revealing a great reservoir of skill and patience, not to mention endurance in the cold temperatures of the winter months. We completed the refurbishment, which has transformed this corner of our church into a sacred and historic space.

On 10 September 2010 we welcomed about 45 people from KILN, a large city insurance company, into St John's for the second time for a team building exercise. Back in 2008 they had created an office and painted each of the porticoes. In 2010, we presented them with an even greater challenge: to create a new kitchen/café area in church and to turn the archive room into a





fully functioning community office. The result of this team building exercise has enabled St John's to offer a greater welcome with better facilities for hospitality and work.

After commissioning an acoustic survey we began the process of upgrading our sound system. We installed new speakers and purchased microphones that were more suitable for our acoustics. After Professor Green performed a sold-out show at St John's, Relentless Energy donated £3000 towards our new loop system.

St John at Hackney Churchyard Gardens is a green space at the heart of Hackney. Rich in history, it was a burial ground for over 500 years and has been managed as a park since 1894. It has undergone many changes throughout its history, most recently in 2006 when it benefited from a £1.79 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant. It is now a well-loved, beautiful spot all year round. Bordering on a busy shopping street, it is an ideal place for some peace and quiet or a gentle stroll. The children's play area is perfect for families to enjoy some outdoor time together. The Churchyard Gardens hold a Green Flag award, given to the best green spaces in the country and awarded each year to make sure that the quality remains high.

Joshua Watson is one of the unsung heroes of the Church of England. It was from St John at Hackney, where his brother John was the Rector, that the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church was established by Royal Charter in 1811. Over the course of the following 40 years, the National Society oversaw the development of over 15,000 schools in England and Wales. Today, the National Society oversees the education of over one million children. There are some who argue that it was the vision of Joshua Watson that led to the educational system that we enjoy today, with free education for all children. This was his vision.

Opening our Building

The 2011 Hackney riots started when a teenager was arrested in the grounds of the church. Fr Rob Wickham and the Rt Rev Adrian Newman, enjoying his first weekend as the Bishop of Stepney, were on the streets when the trouble started. The police asked the clerics if they could ask the rioters to stop throwing rocks and other heavy objects. In order to save an injured woman, they confronted violent men and youths at the height of the riot. Exactly one week on from the riots, St John's organised a community tea party, attended by hundreds of local residents. Fr Rob told Radio 4 that he was reminded of the saying 'I am my brother's keeper'. He asked, 'to what extent do we break down the social barriers that exist in our cities?' and spoke of the need to seek 'the welfare of the city', to tend to the interests of everybody.

After the riots in 2011, hundreds of people took part in a listening exercise to try to understand why such disturbances had happened in our communities. One factor seemed to be the levels of unemployment. Although thousands of jobs were available during the Olympic Games, very few people in Hackney thought they could apply for them. LOCOG, the organisation responsible for delivering the Games, agreed to work with London Citizens to ensure that local





people could secure employment for that summer. LOCOG worked with us to persuade Olympic contractors to hold recruitment fairs in our churches, mosques and schools. Several events took place at St John at Hackney, with over 1000 people attending employment and recruitment fairs. As a result, over 500 people, from all backgrounds and of all ages, found work. This deepened the church's sense of community ministry.

We were thrilled to work with Through Unity and the Chickenshed theatre company to host a performance of *Crime of the Century* in memory of Shaquille Smith. Shaquille's uncle, Paul Morrell, is the Director of the company. Over the course of a week, young people from Hackney devised their own production about growing up in Hackney. On the Saturday evening, three extraordinary things took place. First, we witnessed the young people's performance. Second, we heard speeches and presentations from five parents who had lost children to gun and knife crime. This was the most moving tribute, which led us into the third and final aspect: the performance of *Crime of the Century*. This was a day we will never forget. Word 4 Weapons is a multi-award-winning Christian based organisation formed in 2007 by Michael Smith to counteract the wave of knife and gun crime that was devastating our communities. St John at Hackney was one of the first churches to install a knife bin in its grounds. In 2012 we collected over 1000 knives, making this bin the most used that year. In 2013 Fr Rob won an award from Hackney Council for Community Building and Word 4 Weapons 'Most Inspiring Community Leader' award.

We are committed to making Hackney Central a more attractive place. Working with Hackney Council, in Christmas 2011 we were able to offer:

- hand-made presents, decorations and Christmas trees;
- hot cider, mulled wine, mince pies and festive food;
- free skating in the pop-up rink;
- Santa's grotto;
- St John at Hackney children's pantomime;
- characters from the Hackney Empire pantomime taking to the streets;
- carol singing, jazz, soul, gospel and traditional choral music.

In 2011 we introduced a Saturday market to our beautiful Churchyard Gardens. Hackney has an incredible array of wonderful home grown talent, which is showcased in our Saturday market. The market supports and encourages local traders and small businesses, as well as charity and community groups

Headway East London, supporting survivors of brain injury, their families and carers, presented a fundraising Dance Marathon at St John's in 2013.

St John at Hackney has been the host venue for Mencap's Little Noise Sessions since 2011. The Sessions, curated by Jo Whiley, showcase performances from some of the hottest names in music. St John at Hackney provides the perfect backdrop for a series of performances as stunning as its atmospheric interior. Artists have included, Coldplay, Gary Barlow, Sinéad O'Connor, Goldfrapp, Richard Hawley, Ed Sheeran, Emeli Sandé, Elbow and The Maccabees.





As well as hosting the Little Noise Sessions, St John's is fast becoming a leading London music venue, presenting live music every month. We have hosted shows with many cutting-edge artists, including Stars of The Lid, Purity Ring, Mediaeval Baebes, Nils Frahm and Ólafur Arnalds.

Channelling our Resources

The focus of our Church-based projects is children and young people, older people, and health.

Through the work of Toyin Ajidele, our Youth Worker from 2007 to 2010 and an extraordinary group of volunteers, we have developed a series of wonderful opportunities for children and young people. Central to this provision are the residential holidays to King's Ely school, Bryanston School in Dorset and All Saints' Church in Martock, Somerset. Over the five years, this work has been funded by the Merchant Taylors' Company and by Investec Bank. In addition, we have offered children's provision for both half term and school holidays. These have been organised by a great team of volunteers, whose dedication is clear in making these happen. We really value the support of our partner parishes, Ely Cathedral and All Saints' Martock. Hackney Children's Theatre was developed by Adrenalindance with the support of St John at Hackney in 2011. It is now on its way to becoming a thriving fixture and community offering on Hackney's cultural calendar. The Theatre has hosted a wide range of artists making excellent work especially for children at an affordable price.

Over the last five years, Adrenalindance has developed a strong community dance program with support from St John at Hackney Church. They have made available affordable and accessible children's dance sessions. Romp and Roll is St John's and Adrenalin's successful adult and toddler class, which has run for four years with a large following.

Senior Saints is a group that began in 2010 through the work of Fr David Evans. This is a monthly gathering of the over 55 s, and a chance for friendships to develop. Many of the meetings take place in a local restaurant or pub, and occasionally there is a trip to the cinema or an art gallery or to the theatre. Since 2012, the groups have been coordinated by Marian Brame, our Pastoral Assistant and Fr Chris Ferris, the Associate Rector.

The Dr Spurstowe Almshouses have also been completely rebuilt. Following a significant grant from the Housing Corporation, the 16- bedsit unit, built in the 1960s, was demolished. This has been replaced by 31 stunning state-of-the-art units. These are now fully occupied, offering great support to the over 55 s. Our thanks go to David Horder, Chair of the Trustees for steering this project to completion

Catherine Bell has been working with the over-55 s at St John at Hackney for the last three years, first, with free weekly movement workshops and then, in April 2013, co-leading the Holding Time project with another Hackney-based artist. This work has been extremely enriching and rewarding. The movement-oiled joints produced stronger, more coordinated bodies, developed confidence in all of the participants both as movers and also communicators. We were especially pleased to see new friendships and networks being created as a result of the sessions. This has been a unique inter-generational project.





In response to the growing levels of childhood obesity in Hackney, we established the Healthy Cooking Club, aimed at helping families to make healthy, tasty and cost effective meals.

In 2010, St John at Hackney, in association with Positive East, became one of the first churches to offer free HIV testing. Positive East is a leading community-based HIV charity. Building on more than 20 years' experience in the successful delivery of services across east London boroughs, they now provide fully comprehensive and coordinated practical and emotional support for those living with, and affected by, HIV in east London.

What was the total cost of the project?

The costs associated with the project have been difficult to calculate. Certainly the turnover of St John at Hackney is now between £200-250k. Not bad with just £30k in reserves. Each project is funded differently.

What was the funding strategy?

We operate a hand to mouth existence, undergirded by prayer. We also act in an unusual entrepreneurship model of church, where there is much focus on networking, and using the opportunities unique to London to fund various sections of the project.

How long did it take from start to finish - from initial proposal to the building being completed and opened?

This section of the project has been 6 years in the making. We now have a £3.4million fundraising campaign in place, involving the building of 58 new homes and a new community centre to complement our work. Part of this is now an extensive application to HLF.

What lessons were learnt? What would you have done differently?

There were many lessons learned. Primarily, it is impossible to change the culture of a church without significant prayer and emotional investment. In addition, there are several members of the church who have left on account of these developments and changes, and it is important that as a church you don't take these movements personally. In addition, even with careful communication and planning, these developments take a lot more time than you realize! Also key to this development was the appointment of a good administrator!

As for doing things differently, we would have put more emphasis on the development of discipleship courses at the same time. We have developed the use of the building, but as the congregation has grown, the pieces are not yet in place to nurture and properly deepen new faith.





The church interior before and after reordering

Has there been an increase in footfall?

We enjoyed some 40,000 visitors last year to the church building. This is a considerable increase.

To what degree has this project contributed to the sustainability of the building itself?

The users of the building now pay for the building. None of the planned giving from St John at Hackney is spent on the day to day upkeep of the building.

What management structures are in place for the running of the building?

We have an Administrator / Venue Manager, she oversees the day to day administration. In addition, several PCC working parties oversee this work from a Governance perspective.



The new café area

To what degree has this project contributed to the life of the church as church?

The church has blossomed in number. We have trebled in size, and we now enjoy three Sunday services.

Any future plans for the building?

There are plans for phase 2 of the Project, to overhaul the building, with new meeting rooms, lifts to new offices, new heating and lightning, solar panels to the roof, new disabled access and new toilets.

If you want to contact the church or to find out more visit their website at:
<http://www.stjohnathackney.org.uk/home.shtml>

Title photo copyright Fin Fahey. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license.